MARKETERS NEED CULTURAL INTROSPECTION

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ABSTRACT

Culture is defined as the sum total of people's beliefs, values, customs, norms, morals, and all other capabilities and habits that regulate their behavior in a society. Culture is all encompassing, and so pervasive that it affects the very way people think and act. That is why people are often unaware how culture affects all aspects of their lives and influences their each and every life decision. Therefore, in order to plan for effective and efficient exchanges, it is critically important to fully understand the cultures of both the marketers and their target markets. This paper argues that such understanding must begin with marketers carrying out a thorough introspection of their own culture by analyzing how others see them. Further, the paper presents a way to do such introspection by studying their customers' perception of the marketer's own culture.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing science in engaged in the quest to understand, explain, predict, and possibly control exchanges in all spheres of human life. A major part of marketing's inquiry is devoted to exploring exchanges of for-profit and nonprofit organizations. This is aptly reflected in the way the American Marketing Association defines marketing (Approved October 2007): "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (AMA 2007).

Naturally, it is very important for global marketers of products and services, and global communicators of ideas, whether for profit or not, to understand the motivations and behaviors of both sides of the exchange equation: the marketers and their customers. Considerable research sponsored by marketing organizations has therefore focused on understanding how their customers i.e. people in general, beginning as children and growing up into adulthood, become unique individuals forming their own characteristics, goals and aspirations, and motivation to work toward satisfaction of those goals.

Among the numerous nature and nurture related factors that play a role in the formation of human personality, culture has a unique place. On the one hand, culture acts as an all pervasive force in creating the total personality of individuals growing up and/or living in that culture. And on the other hand, culture acts as an external environmental factor influencing, facilitating, and constraining each individual's desired behaviors. Consequently, a major stream of market research has been devoted to understanding the culture in all its dimensions.

This paper is an effort to discuss why such cultural understanding needs to begin with marketers first carrying out a thorough introspection of their own culture and present a way to do such introspection through empirical research.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Despite a very long history of research in the field, and a general recognition of its importance in many disciplines, a universal consensus on the definition of culture has continued to remain elusive. Many competing definitions have attempted to capture the most important aspects of culture.

American Heritage Dictionary defines Culture as "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population." (American Heritage Dictionary 1985)

Some researchers define culture thusly: Culture is a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of a society. These orientations, taken together, provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable (Terpstra and David 1991; de Waal, Frans 2001). This definition emphasizes the fact that culture is not a biologically transmitted genetic characteristic, but is passed on to the next generation through various influence groups in the society.

Culture's omnipresent influence on people is captured by some researchers by defining it as "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category from those of another." (Hofstede 1991) People perceive themselves as well as the world through the lens of their own culture and respond in a manner conditioned by that culture (Ueltschy and Krampf 2001). Culture is all encompassing, and so pervasive that it affects the very way people think and act. That is why people are often unaware of how culture affects every aspect of their lives and influences each and every one of their life decisions. Interestingly, this enormous influence of one's culture becomes most visible when one interacts with people of other cultures (Friedman 2005).

Just as on one the hand the recognition of culture as an all pervasive force influencing human behavior is growing, its increasing complexity is making it harder to define and analyze than ever before (Craig and Douglas 2006). With the increased interaction of world cultures due to globalization of commerce, education, and travel, cultures are constantly changing by responding to and incorporating elements from foreign cultures. Depending on one's view of its desirability, such changes are described as contamination, pluralization, hybridization, enhancement, or even enrichment (Friedman 2005).

THE CONSTRUCT OF CULTURE

For the purpose of this paper, culture will be defined as the sum total of a society's accumulated learning, consisting of mental knowledge and capabilities plus physical skills, developed, acquired, and commonly shared, by members of a society, that regulates and affects the way the society lives, and the expression of this learning through:

- Ideas: such as beliefs, values, and morals;
- Behavioral guidelines: such as laws, norms, customs, habits, language, religion, and social institutions; and
- Creations: such as social infrastructure, buildings, bridges, monuments, art, architecture, and industrial and consumer products.

In other words, it is the sum total of people's beliefs, values, customs, norms, morals, and all other capabilities and habits that regulate their behavior in a society. It includes all activities, interests, opinions, attitudes, language, religion, family, gender and age roles, social stratification–in short the way people live.

Not only culture is a multidimensional construct, but it operates at multiple levels, beginning from the innermost and most influential circle of cultural agents, and ending with the outermost and most indirect influences, namely, family, reference group (consisting of neighbors, friends, and colleagues at work), social class, subcultures of various groups an individual belongs to—either voluntarily or involuntarily, national culture, regional or multinational culture, and finally global culture (Karahanna, Evaristo, and Strite 2005).

Moreover, the different dimensions of culture are interrelated. One element of a person's culture such as race has an impact on another element such as the social status, which in turn may influence a third element such as the language spoken. Thus, culture is not a random collection of attributes and behaviors but rather like a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece has a specific position and role, and all fit together (Terpstra and David 1991).

Researchers have identified several new dimensions to capture some of the unique facets of world cultures as listed below:
1. Power distance = Extent to which inequality among people that is viewed as acceptable
2. Uncertainty Avoidance = Extent to which people of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty and rely on mechanisms to reduce it
3. Individualism = Degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as group members, as opposed to Collectivism = Degree to which the interests of the group take center
This dimension classifies the world into "me" versus "we" societies.

4. Masculinity = Importance of male values such as assertiveness, status, success, competitive drive and achievement over female values such as focus on people orientation, solidarity, quality of life.

In directly, this dimension ends measuring the relative importance of men versus women in the society (Hofstede 1991).

5. Long-termism = Pragmatic long-germ orientation where values center around future e.g. perseverance, thrift, etc. versus short-term orientation values focus on past and present e.g. respect, tradition, etc. (Hofstede and Bond 1988)

6. Importance of Context resulting in classification of cultures as High v Low Context Cultures

Interpretation of messages in high context cultures rests heavily on contextual cues and little is made explicit in the message itself. What is not said may be as important as what is said. In low context cultures what is said is what is meant (Hall 1977; Financial Times 2005). High and low context cultures also differ in how much importance they attach to logic. Low context cultures of the West have deep-rooted intolerance for logical contradictions. Easterners on the other hand can live with them and even appreciate them. (Nisbett 2004)

CONCEPTION OF AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PRESENT RESEARCH

This concentration of marketing organizations' research effort on consumers, their exchange partners, is probably due to their implicit and quite justifiable assumption that they already understand their own goals and motivations, and take them into account in carefully designing their strategies to fit the needs of each market. Further, marketing organizations are personified by their employees, i.e. their executives, and staff, who too are individuals with their own culture and personalities. And since, for the consumers, they represent the culture of the marketers, marketers pay meticulous attention to educating and training their employees so that they would represent the organization's strategies effectively to the markets.

However, one important but often overlooked aspect of this effort is to make sure that those strategies are in fact correctly perceived by the consumers when seen through the consumers' own cultural lenses. Because, as far as the consumers are concerned their "Perception is their reality," and any misperception about the marketer could turn them away from staying in the exchange process, and become a strategic disaster for the marketer.

From another angle, marketers can change only what they control. Therefore, the easiest thing for them to do is to ensure that their own culture is presented correctly and effectively, with minor adaptations for specific market needs where necessary, and check that it is in fact so perceived by their consumers. Such sensitivity to consumer perceptions will help translate into reality the intentions and plans of the marketers in their most effective form, and must form an important part every marketing strategy.

Therefore, it can be argued that understanding the needs and motivations of both sides of the exchange process must begin with marketers carrying out a thorough introspection of their own culture by analyzing how their consumers see them. Clearly, the major interest of the marketers would be in two types of findings:

a. to identify important misconceptions of the consumers that can hurt the marketers' interests so that they can be corrected, and

b. to discover similarities and differences between the two cultures as seen by the customers in order to locate potential areas of cultural conflicts so that appropriate strategies can be designed to deal with them.

On this in the background, the present study was designed with the objective of creating an instrument that can be used to measure the consumers' perceptions about a marketer's culture as compared to their own culture on several dimensions. Such instrument would provide the necessary input for the marketers to carry out the introspection of their own culture.

RESEARCH DESIGN

1. As the first step to measuring a multidimensional multilevel construct such as culture, the study identified as many important and universal facets of culture as are useful in comparing consumer decisions across cultures. Next, the cultural facets or attributes were classified into several dimensions to facilitate easy communication to the consumer subjects, and meaningful analysis of the results later on. A list of the dimensions used to so classify the cultural attributes is presented in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1
DIMENSIONS USED TO CLASSIFY CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES
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Personal Values
Preferences for and importance of personal values

Social Values
Preferences in relating to and working with others

Importance of Context in Communications
Relative importance of context as opposed to content in communications

Attitudes and Values toward Environment
Values related to economic, technical, and physical environment

Social Attitudes
Attitudes toward roles and behaviors of others

Determinants of Social Status
Attributes used as determinants of social status

Concept of Family
Definition of family, and its importance in personal decisions

DEMOGRAPHICS
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2. The next step was to develop scales appropriate for each cultural dimension. It was decided to use Semantic Differential scales in preference to Likert scales for two reasons: First, the semantic differential scales would correctly and effectively convey the exact cultural aspect being investigated in each item. Second, since the main objective of the study is to develop qualitative understanding of misperceptions and identify cultural dimensions of potential conflict, the unique advantage of Likert scales in enabling summation of ratings to compute an overall score was of little interest in this study.

Sample instructions and the Likert scale used for one item is presented in Exhibit 2.

EXHIBIT 2
SAMPLE INSTRUCTIONS AND LIKERT SCALE USED
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"Each cultural dimension is followed by a 5-point scale with labels describing its two opposite ends. The numbers 5 to 1 represent the adjectives: Very, Somewhat, Neither Nor, Somewhat, and Very, applied to the label closest to it.

For example, consider Item 03, of the questionnaire reproduced below:

CULTURAL ATTRIBUTE	American	Chinese
Preference for a life that is physically active versus passive		
Active = 5 4 3 2 1 = Passive	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1

It asks you to indicate each culture's preference for physically active versus passive lifestyle. Therefore, the numbers have the following meanings: 5 = Very active, 4 = Somewhat active, 3 = Neither active Nor passive, 2 = Somewhat passive, and 1 = Very passive. If you believe that a culture prefers an extremely active life style, circle number 5. On the other hand, if you believe it prefers somewhat active life style, circle number 4."
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3. Finally, a pilot study was conducted on a sample of respondents from the market so as to assess the clarity of purpose and effectiveness of the instrument in eliciting the needed information from the respondents.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS
1. The pilot study enabled identify and correct the wording of the items of the instrument to correctly convey the cultural dimension being explored. The study confirmed the appropriateness of the questionnaire in eliciting the information it is designed to collect. However, in order to survey customers who do not speak English, it may become necessary to translate the questionnaire into other languages.

2. Initially, the instrument will be used to actually collect information from different regional and international consumer groups served by American marketers to understand how they see the American culture in comparison to their own cultures.

It is expected that the information so obtained can be analyzed to achieve multiple objectives for American marketers:

a. To conduct a thorough introspection of our own culture, become sensitive to how it is perceived by our exchange partners, and identify any misperceptions that need to be corrected.

b. To understand the impact of our culture on our own perceptions, communications, and actions

c. To identify areas of potential cultural conflicts and develop advance plans to deal with them.

3. However, beyond that, the questionnaire is universal in its nature and can be used by any global marketer involved in domestic as well as international marketing. After all, there are always many cultural differences among various regions and communities even within a country. As such, it is expected that any researcher involved in comparative study of cultures will find the instrument useful.

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